

Week Seven Handout

“Christian History in America: Visions, Realities, and Turning Points”

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Class 7: Skeletons in the Closet: Manifest Destiny and Slavery

Class 7 Goals

Examine some of the contradictions that developed in Protestant America between the ideals of the Gospel message and the realities of American Life.

Explore the legacy of Manifest Destiny for America and the Church.

Study the debates about the morality of slavery that were held in the Churches and the Nation.

Ask how American Christians were able to reconcile their faith and slaveholding.

Opening Question

As people who claim to base our lives around the Bible, how can we be sure that we are using it properly?

In what circumstances or situations are we most likely to misuse or even abuse the Scriptures?

John Quincy Adams on July 4 - 1837

“Is it not that, in the chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birthday of the Savior? That it forms a leading event in the progress of the Gospel dispensation? Is it not that the Declaration of Independence first organized the social compact on the foundation of the Redeemer’s mission upon the earth?”

“Freedom to the slave! Liberty to the captives! Redemption! Redemption forever to the race of man from the yoke of oppression!”

Horace Bushnell

“The wilderness shall bud and blossom as the rose before us; and we will not cease, till a Christian nation throws up its temples of worship on every hill and plain; till knowledge, virtue, and religion, blending their dignity and their healthful power, have filled our great country with a manly and happy race of people, and the bonds of a complete Christian commonwealth are seen to span the continent.”

John L. O’Sullivan

“...by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us.”

Tecumseh’s Complaint

"Brother, I wish you to give me close attention, because I think you do not clearly understand. I want to speak to you about promises that the Americans have made. You recall the time when the Jesus Indians of the Delawares lived near the Americans, and had confidence in their promises of friendship, and thought they were secure, yet the Americans murdered all the men, women, and children, even as they prayed to Jesus. The same promises were given to the Shawnee one time. . .

It was at Fort Finney, where some of my people were forced to make a treaty. Flags were given to my people, and they were told they were now the children of the Americans. We were told, if any white people mean to harm you, hold up these flags and you will then be safe from all danger. We did this in good faith. But what happened? Our beloved chief Moluntha stood with the American flag in front of him and that very peace treaty in his hand, but his head was chopped by a American officer, and that American officer was never punished

Spotty Lincoln

During the debate over the Mexican War Lincoln demanded to know the spot where Mexican Troops fired on American Troops on American Soil.
He was defeated for reelection.

Legacies of Manifest Destiny

Justifications: In the name of God, Democracy, and Freedom.
Displacing Native Americans from traditional lands?
Picking fights with weaker neighbors to gain land?
Spreading the institution of slavery into new areas?
Promoting quick exploitation of natural resources instead of sustainable uses?

The Emergence of Anti-Slavery Theology

1700 Samuel Sewall publishes the Selling of Joseph.
Mennonites and Quakers adopt antislavery positions and expel slaveholders.
Southern Methodists and Baptists begin to follow suit but are pushed back by social, political, and economic pressure.

The Pro-Slavery Argument

Genesis 9:25-27 (Curse of Canaan applied to Africans?)
Genesis 12:5, 17:13 (Abraham Owning Slaves)
Lev. 25:44-46, Exod. 21:20 (Surrounding nations described as slaves – punishment for sin)
Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22, 4:11, Titus 2:9-10, I Pet. 2:18 (Slaves obey your masters, but just and equally?)
Philemon (Paul returns a run-away slave to his master, but to be received as a brother)

Abolitionist Arguments

Exod. 21:16 (Death penalty for stealing people, but only for Hebrews?)
Deut. 7:1-2 (Slavery only as a result of punishment for sin.)
Lev. 25 (Concept of the Jubilee – Freedom for Slaves)

Deut. 23:15-16 (Forbids Israelites from returning runaway slaves, but only from non-God fearing masters?)

Acts 17:26 (Equality by Creation)

Gal 3:28 (In Christ there is neither bond nor free.)

For Table Discussion

What do you do when an important question of Biblical interpretation can't just be resolved by looking at proof texts?

What happens when, "The Bible says it, I believe it," doesn't settle it?

The Hermeneutical Turn

Hermeneutics (From the Greek God Hermes – Messenger of the Gods.) – Principles of Biblical Interpretations

Rely on most important principles– the ethic of Love. (Some Biblical passages are more important than others)

Progressive Revelation – God revealed more of himself over time – anti-slavery principle appears later. (But does the Gospel "adjust itself to the times?")

Hermeneutics II

Historical Hermeneutic

Examine the time period and historical context in which the command was given.

Then determine which commands are eternal and which are time bound.

Both pro and anti-slavery polemicists make enormous use of historical arguments to support their positions.

What role do cultural assumptions play in Biblical Interpretation?

Especially notions of racial superiority?

Ideas about hierarchy?

If we question Scripture's view on slavery, what else will we question?

The Tragedy of Theodore Weld

Descended from Puritan Ministers.

Converted by Finney to Evangelicalism in 1826.

Became a passionate revivalist anti-slavery activist.

Married Angelina Grimké

Theodore Dwight Weld II

Hired as a Whig party activist to battle slavery in DC.

Became disillusioned with the slow pace of reform.

Began to doubt that moral suasion and evangelical appeals alone could counter entrenched systemic sins like slavery.

Eventually drifted away into Unitarianism and heterodoxy believing that Evangelicalism had failed in its promise to transform the world.

The Tragedy of Frederick Douglass

Born a slave in Tuckahoe, Maryland.
Eventually became educated and escaped to freedom.
Excerpts from his Autobiography

The Tragedy of America

When America was most heavily influenced by Evangelical Protestant people and values and with the consistent support of many ministers and believers.

(despite consistent protest from both the most radical and most liberal believers)

Development of a form of National Patriotic Idolatry

Pursuit of territorial expansion and displacement of Native Americans and Mexicans without considering the cost

Entrenched a system of racial slavery in search of profit and feelings of racial superiority.

Challenge Application Question

Have we adequately repented of these corporate sins of both the church and the nation?

What areas of moral blindness or mis-application of scripture might we be struggling with as a church or as a nation today?

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